

POSTMODERN

JAY-AR PALOMA

MUSIC
SITES





FICTION





The Last Cup

If there was a word to describe what I felt at that moment, it perhaps haven't been invented yet.

But it felt like all the air has been sucked out of the room, and with it, all the sounds it carried. What remained was the percussion in my chest — my telltale heart beating like a lonely metronome. That was how it was when I first met him, and now, three years on, I had the same feeling. Like I was seeing him again for the first time.

“Hello,” he greeted half-awkwardly before sitting, raising an eyebrow in response to my silence. “I’m not that late again, am I?” He joked, displaying that smile that destroyed my defenses so many times before. Yes, he was late as usual, but how could I not forgive him? I remember his face so well. That dimple could coax out all the temperance I hold in like a dam; those ears that perk and redden when I tell him I love him. And those eyes — two dark obsidians that sparkle in earnest when he says he loves me back.

I told him it's fine and I ordered our usual coffee. We are at our favorite coffee house, some artisanal place just outside the city. He hated big chains as much as he loved his coffee and as such we have always prioritized these small businesses. He started tapping his feet in impatience, a maddening habit that he seemed to not have shaken off. “Why did you invite me out of the blue?” He asked. He was never one to be subtle.

I received an offer abroad, I said. A dairy factory is opening in New Zealand and they needed a food chemist. For the first time since seeing him this afternoon, he looked genuinely happy. “I’m so excited for you! It’s always been your dream to work abroad.”



Our dream, I wanted to correct him, but I didn't. I made a comment about his weight to sway us momentarily from the topic. He had been overweight before, not that that distracted from his boyish handsomeness; but now, he is very fit and had an inexplicable glow to him. "Christopher had me go on the keto diet. And we go to the gym together, too." It was the first of many instances he spoke of his new love's name. He told me how they met on some dating app (like we did), how they hit it off completely; how Christopher has some kind of condition that messed with his heart and how he would do all these things for him so they could live a long, happy life together. It was wonderful, hearing how in love he is now.

"We are actually planning on getting married soon." How? I asked. Well, gay marriage is not legal in the country yet, he said, so Christopher suggested a traditional "handfasting" ceremony. One of his friends from church could officiate too if they ask, he said. I nodded politely as he explained their plans together, molding his new love's image in my mind from all the second hand information. Christopher is tall and dark. He is crazy religious. He's a finicky eater and never gets fat. He hates coffee, apparently. The more I hear of him, the more I don't understand how this guy in front of me can look so enamored. They practically have nothing in common.

He and I, on the other hand, are like two peas in a pod. We both like geeky stuff (I remember him gifting me the latest Pokémon game as an anniversary present).

We both liked to read. We traveled a lot together. And we dreamt together. We wanted to leave this world and build our lives together as far away from here as we can. But as it turned out, dreams are just that; it doesn't work when you are awake.



The coffee arrived mid-story and we paused for a bit to drink. Mine was an Irish cappuccino, while his, as always, was a double shot mocha espresso. He had this little ritual where he would lift it first to his nose and sniff the coffee, closing his eyes in peaceful ecstasy before kissing the brim of the cup. He exhaled in positive appraisal of his drink then smiled at me, urging me to follow suit. I did, feeling the bitter acid slide down my esophagus.

His smile was wan. “I don’t think I’ve ever thanked you.” For what? I asked. He shook his head and chuckled ironically. “For the freedom you gave me. If you haven’t broken up with me, then I would never have met Christopher.”

But I never wanted to break up with him, I wanted to scream. He knew this. We had plans together. We dreamt our future already. But shortly after our first anniversary, my parents found out about us. I guess I already saw it coming since he had been asking me when he can meet them. He never did, because they would never allow me to. The moment they found out I was dating another man, they gave me two options: to leave home or to leave him. I left him.

I forced a smile back despite myself, telling him an ironic “you’re welcome” as a joke to lighten the mood. It worked; his real smile returned, and against the sunlight he looked like he had a halo. Which was appropriate, for he was an angel. I took another swig of coffee and for some reason, he looked at me funny, his lips pursed against the mouth I longed to kiss so much since we separated.

“You know,” he paused, weighing his words carefully, “You don’t need to pretend you like coffee anymore.” I looked at him quizzically but he went on. “I know you hate coffee. Remember our first date?” How could I forget? We spent nearly the whole day together getting to know each other and by the end of it he was already sure that I was the person he wanted to spend his life with.



Then to cap it all off, he invited him to this same coffee house. He said he loved coffee, so I ordered the first drink I saw on the menu and regretted it as soon as my hyperacidity kicked in.

Drinking coffee became a ritual then for us, a part of every date, and I didn't have the heart to break it. "I saw how you winced when you drank that first cup. I thought you would just get used to it but you really didn't. In retrospect, I guess that was one of the reasons I fell in love with you."

He looked at me without blinking. "It sounds silly, I know. But I told myself: here is a person who loves you enough to pretend to like something you love even though he hates it." He paused, and when he began again, his voice was lower. "Now, I realize that was wrong. I chose you. It shouldn't have mat-tered what I did or didn't like."

I wondered then, what else did he know? Did he know that I left him not because I felt like didn't have a choice, but because I was too cowardly to choose what mattered? Does he know that leaving for abroad was not for my dream alone, but because it was the only form of freedom I can have? Does he know that I still love him with all my heart and will love him for the rest of my life? Does he know how it pains me to see him in arms aside my own — and how much I pray we be together in another life, if not this?

If he did know these things, he showed no indication. All he did was finish his coffee quietly, observing me from behind his cup until all the content is gone. He wiped his face clean with a tissue. "It was great seeing you again. I need to leave now, though; Christopher is waiting for me in the parking lot." I told him it was okay for him to go. We both stood up, and what used to be a long embrace turned into an appropriate handshake. "Take care and good luck!" He said before turning to leave. After a few steps however, he turned back to face me and smiled.



“I sincerely hope you find the happiness you so deserve.”

I sat down while watching his back disappear towards the exit. I thought of us, what we were, and what he said. I felt deflated, like a star collapsing on its own after expending all its energy. It's true that there are no certainties in life, but he taught me that at the very least I need to be honest with who I am. Then maybe I can be honest to the whole world. Perhaps that was a good start.

I lift my coffee absentmindedly to my mouth, then, tasting the stale, lukewarm liquid, half-decided to spit it out before finally drinking it all. I put the empty cup down in silent conviction. I promised myself that that will be the last cup of coffee I will ever drink.



Canes

A flurry of dancing colored lights reflected on Cecilia's eyes, but she didn't need to blink them away. It was early Christmas morning, and as always, her and her grandmother's tradition is to spend it in the final night mass. The cold December air chilled her, but Lola gave her a comforting pat, warming her ever so slightly. Cecilia always marveled at her grandmother's strength. How, at age seventy-five, she could still make the considerable walk to the local church to go to mass just with the use of her trusty cane.

Cecilia used to believe that the cane held special powers. She re-remembered a story her grandmother used to tell her when she was little. She used to spend every Christmas with her, the only time her entire family could be together as her parents worked in the city.

"Do you know why walking sticks were invented?" Her grandmother's raspy voice would ask. Little Cecilia would shake her head, staring up in wonder at her.

"You see, my love, sticks are meant to protect us. Back in the dawn of time, people lived more with nature. Sticks are made by the first men to ward off danger, like wild animals."

"Is that why you have a cane, grandma? To ward off danger?"

Her grandmother leaned back on her rocking chair, squinting in discomfort as she did. "I guess you can say that, my love."



Cecilia pursed her lips, looking lost in thought. “Can I also get a cane so I can protect myself, too?” The old woman chuckled and pinched her cheek.

“You are in no danger. I am here to protect you, remember?” She smiled her usual sweet, toothless smile. “How about I give you a candy cane instead? That seems to be more appropriate.” Cecilia certainly relished the sweet treat, fascinated by the alternating red and white stripes as she slowly twirled the confection in her mouth.

Part of their Christmas tradition as grandmother and granddaughter was to attend the *misa de gallo*. The nine evening masses were always special to Cecilia, as even getting to the church was a treat to her senses. She loved the sight of the sparkling lights and *parol*; the tolling of the church bells beckoning them. The smell of the *puto bungbong*, so much so that she could almost taste it, too. Everything was special during that period, and on every ninth day of the mass, she had one wish: that she would get to stay with her grandmother for good.

When she was fourteen, she got her wish. But not in the way she expected.

The car accident made Cecilia an orphan, and as she had no other relatives, she was entrusted to her grandmother. The traumatic brain injury she suffered also left her near completely blind as well. Lola was a strong woman, Cecilia thought, but fate never prepared her to take care of someone in the twilight of her life. “My love? Do you want to go for a walk?” This is the question that Lola would ask her for the next two years. Cecilia would rather spend her time in bed by herself. She refused to seek therapy to get her mobile and more independent, and aside from memorizing the basic layout of her grandmother’s apartment, she was completely helpless everywhere else. The white cane given to her for use was left pristine, stowed away somewhere to rot in disuse.

But her Christmas sojourns with Lola remained. She would take in all that her senses could as she walked with her grandmother, hand-in-hand, as if reverting back to her childhood. She didn't feel the need to do anything otherwise. As long as Lola was there, she would have nothing to fear.

One day, however, Lola did not come home when she should. Cecil-ia could do nothing but panic, for she knew that to find her means she would actually need to go outside. But the world is a big, bad place. It took away her family and her sight, and perhaps it will take away her beloved Lola, too. Lost in her own anxious thoughts, a loud banging on the door distracted her from her reverie.

“Young lady, we would like to verify if this old woman lives here?” A stern, yet kind voice reverberated as soon as she opened the door. She did not speak, and the silence lingered. Who could have been the person talking about? If he was correct, then the old woman surely could only be her grandmoth-er.

“I'm sorry. I didn't know you couldn't see what I meant,” said the voice again, apparently now figuring out Cecilia couldn't see. “I am a police officer. We found her wandering around confused. Her identification says this is her address.” An awkward pause ensued, with neither of them knowing how to go on. Slowly, Cecilia held her hand aloft, forcing what little light reflected against her pupils to lead her hand to the old woman's face.

The troughs of her wrinkled face spelled words under her fingers like braille. It was Lola.



Cecilia had to make up lies to the policeman, saying that her parents will come home soon, and not that a blind girl and an old woman slowly going senile only have each other for support. When the police officer left, she led her grandmother carefully to her bed and sang her to sleep. She managed to sleep at her bedside, and woke up the next day to the sensation of someone stroking her hair.

“I’m afraid the time has come to admit it, my love.” Lola spoke slowly, her voice breaking in places. “I don’t think I can take care of you anymore.” The knot in Cecilia’s stomach tightened, then wound around itself. It was clear that even in her confused state, her grandmother was sharp enough to figure out what happened the previous day.

“No, Lola. I can take care of you.”

“How, Cecilia?” Her voice was not without a hint of accusation, but forlorn. “There are homes we both could go to. We will be taken care of.”

She knew what those homes are. But she also knew that they are better off together. At least she wants to try. Cecilia fumbled along the walls with her hands, finding the ancient armoire in her grandmother’s bedroom. She pulled the compartment below it open and pulled a long object from it.

“I was afraid,” Cecilia said, holding aloft the white cane in front of her. “For so long, I didn’t remember how to fear, Lola, because you have always been there for me. I’m sorry I was so selfish. But I think, this time, it is my turn to protect you.” The task wasn’t easy. The whole world was nowhere near as small as grandmother’s apartment, and the ten or so steps she had to memorize easily turned to hundreds.



Several times she bumped in-to obstacles, even skinning her knee once, but Lola was at her side to help, at least on her good days. Soon, Cecilia can even manage an errand on her own, and by then she knew she was ready.

The year she turned eighteen, Cecilia was more than capable on her own, while Lola's good days be-came too few and far between. But she knew there was no way Lola will miss their Christmas tradition. So come four in the morning, when the peals of the church bells woke them, she held Lola's hand against hers and started their trek.

The cane swung back and forth against her like a constant pendulum, while on her side, the slow thud of Lola's shoes on the cobble-stone road made a nice symphony. Along came the smell of rich rice sweets as she neared their destination, and when the tolling bells gave way to the familiar hymns of mass, Cecilia stopped then pinched the hand clamped gently in her arm.

"We made it Lola," she whispered in quiet victory. Her grandmother gave a satisfied chuckle, patting her granddaughter's arm proudly. Today was luckily one of her good days.

"How do the parish decorations look this year?" Cecilia asked.

"Wonderful." She hoped her grandmother gave a more detailed description, but it was too late any-way, as the homily just started. Besides, she liked that she can still use her imagination, pulling up a kaleidoscope of memories from years ago to form a mosaic in her head.

On her left hand, Cecilia held her own cane close to her body, one tip on the ground. She understood now more than ever what her grandmother meant, about how sticks are meant to protect.



But there was also something comforting about her cane touching the earth; it was her attachment to the real world, the thread that connects her to reality even if she has lost one of her senses. Her cane keeps her grounded.

She smiled at the wisdom she just gained. Lola asked her why, but she just shook her head.

Some secrets are best kept unsaid.



Gamu-Gamong Ligaw

Umaandap-andap ang ilaw sa lobby ng hotel kung saan naghihintay si Elena at ang kanyang ina. “Gaano katagal po kayo magcheck-in Ma’am?” Usisa ng kahera. “Dalawang oras lang,” sagot ni Ester. Ngumiti ito sa anak at hinawi ang buhok na mabusisi niyang inayos kaninang umaaga.

“Excited ka na ba?” Tanong niya, at tumango ang anim na taong gulang.

Maganda ang gaya ni Elena noong araw na iyon: suot niya ang bestidang kulay rosas na may disen-yong Hello Kitty at mga pulang sapatos na pinapayagan lang siyang gamitin tuwing may okasyon. Nilagyan din siya ng koloretos ng kanyang ina, kaya’t may halik ng rosas sa kanyang mga pisngi at labi. Wari’y dalaginding na nga raw siya sabi ng kanyang lola.

Tinanong niya ang ina kung ano ang okasyon at kailangan niyang magbihis. “Naaalala mo ba yung kaibigan ni Mama sa Facebook? Gusto ka daw niyang makilala.” Hindi niya maalala nang mabuti, ngunit isa lang naman ang laging kausap ng kanyang ina sa Facebook. Iyong Aleman na ang tsismis ng mga ka-pitbahay ay gusto raw siyang asawahin. Sa sobrang pagkausyoso, isang beses na sinundan ni Elena ang ina sa computer shop, at nakita niya na kausap nito ang isang matandang lalaking puti na bilugan ang mukha at nakakalbo na.

Pagkalipas ng ilang minuto, binigay ng kahera ang kanilang susi. Inakay ni Ester ang anak papunta sa madilim at kulob na silid. Binuksan niya ang isang lampara sa tabi ng kama.



May isang kompyuter sa may mesa katapat nito. Pinaupo ni Ester ang anak sa kama habang bumuntong-hininga ito at hinawak-an ang kanyang mukha. “Mabait si Klaus, anak. Itong damit na suot mo at paborito mong sapatos? Siya ang nagpadala ng perang pambili niyan.” Dinampi ni Elena ang munting mga daliri sa mga laso sa laylayan ng bestida. “At alam mo? Sabi niya tutulungan niya si Mama sa gamot niya, basta maki-pagkaibigan ka sa kanya.”

Sinuri ni Elena ang mukha ng kanyang ina — kulubot at gabungo sa kapayatan. Malalim at mapula ang kanyang mga mata. Nanginginig ang mga kamay nito habang hinahagkan ang anak, at inisip ni Elena na dahil ito sa kawalan ng gamot. Simula nang iwan sila ng kanyang ama, hindi na madalas makapagturok ng gamot ang kanyang ina.

Noon, sabay ang kanyang magulang mag-iniksyon, at kita niya kung gaano ang ginhawa at saya sa kanil-ang mukha tuwing pagkatapos nito. Hanga siya sa katapangan ng ina, dahil siya man ay takot sa iniksyon tuwing pupunta siya sa health center. Kaya ipinangako niya sa sarili na gagawin ang lahat para sa inang ngayo’y itinataguyod siyang mag-isa.

Pinatay ni Ester ang ilaw sa silid at binuksan ang kompyuter bago tuluyang lumisan ng walang imik. Hindi niya na rin naman kailangan pa magsalita dahil sinabi na niya sa anak ang lahat ng dapat nitong gawin. Lumapit si Elena sa liwanag ng kompyuter na tila ba’y gamu-gamong naakit sa ilaw ng gasera. Kalaunan, lumabas sa monitor ang kanyang hinintay. Malumanay ang tinig ng lalaki, bagaman hindi niya lubos maunawaan ang sinasabi nito. Ngumiti ang dayuhan at nakaramdam siya ng takot, ngunit panandalian niya itong kinalimutan.

Marahan niyang ipinikit ang kanyang mga mata’t hinintay ang mga utos nito.



POETRY





The End

Nothing lasts forever
winding roads hath their bend
and thus I look forward
to the end

When I wave my last goodbye
I will no longer shed a tear
I have coaxed out every morsel.
The end is finally near

Quivering in anticipation,
an arrhythmic heart and
bated breath —
I will open my arms in welcome
“Let down the bars, O Death!”

For courage sprang aplenty
Fear here hath no place
I will end this valediction
My last of days

And when they ink my eulogy
say Grace, when, to and from
To be, only in memory,
For the end has finally come.



Diglossia

Your words,
they're clandestine
But I hear their meaning
clear as a bell.

I understand,
the semantics of your touch
You were the expert linguist
to dialogue with my soul

But no more I can hear
your loudest sentences
A phrase nor a syllable
doesn't make any sense.

You spoke to me once more
perhaps I just misheard —
But we are mere strangers now
speaking different languages.



ESSAYS





Doxxing Behind Dummies: A Dramaturgical Analysis of the Digital Culture Wars in Online Communities

In section 4, Article III of the Philippine Constitution states that “No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, expression, or press(…)” That being said, this same freedom to express opinions does not guarantee freedom from consequences. There are safeguards in our constitution that en-sure punishment for malicious or downright incorrect expression, and most private institutions have specific rules about it indicated in their codes of conduct. Just recently, a university professor got dis-missed because of a malicious post. In this case, a community saw a wrong and used the platform and publicly available information to their advantage to right that wrong. Justice was served.

But the world of social media is a double-edged sword: it is both powerful enough a tool to influence millions in mere seconds, and yet that same power can tear you down. “Cancel culture” is the new normal. With so many social media users (the Philippines itself having a 72.7 internet penetration rate in 2020), it is so common to receive backlash nowadays, encouraging self-censorship. “Think before you post” is the new adage. But what if you have the means to say what you want without the immediate freedom of consequences? Perhaps you cannot do this in the physical world, but in the age of social media, the concept of identity can be as changeable as your latest profile picture.

The Faceless “Majority”

True anonymity, if not impossible, is difficult to achieve online. And yet, it hasn’t stopped people from using the lax registration rules of most social media platforms to masquerade behind fake accounts, or “dummies.” In 2019 alone, Facebook took down more than 3 billion fake accounts and estimated that at least 5% of the platform’s monthly activities are fake.



Reasons for these account creations vary greatly — from innocuous as a role player account or stan accounts for famous celebrities or groups, to something far more sinister, like organized and well-paid troll accounts used to elect a fascist regime. Many times, the lines are blurred between them. They do share one advantage, though: the person behind the account will likely have their privacy intact as rarely would these accounts have any person-ally identifiable details that can be traced back to their users.

Weaponizing Doxxing for Digital Culture Wars

The general freedom from accountability that dummy accounts offer to its creators meant that many have used them for malicious reasons. One of these activities is called “doxxing,” which *The Economist* defines as:

[T]he practice of using the Internet to source out and collect someone’s personal and private information and then publicly releasing that information online.

Doxxing has been around for almost thirty years and has started with generally good intentions in the hacktivist and online vigilante circles. Still, no more has it been weaponized than in today’s world where internet is quickly becoming more accessible and affordable to masses. A quick browse on Twitter or Facebook will probably point you to a viral post of somebody’s perceived wrongdoing tagged with the “pasikatin natin ‘to’” imperative. But online vigilantism is very different from doxxing between online groups with differing opinions. Doxxing is now being used for more sinister purposes: to silence legitimate opinions and criticisms behind a dummy account’s safety.

For instance, in the online pop fiction writing community like Wattpad, a recent trend of silencing legitimate criticism has arisen. While digitally mudslinging each other is not unheard of from the “fans” of these so-called “authors,” the war has turned outward to literary critics.



An article discussing the prob-lematic tropes of popular ro-mance-themed novels was met, not with counter-arguments of similar academic rigor, but by a plethora of ad hominem attacks. Yes, doxxing, that mostly came from faceless accounts on the social media platforms they are associated with. This sets a dangerous precedent, as their unawareness of how to counter-argue leads them to perceive legitimate literary criticism as per-sonal attacks against their idols. Ironically, they transform them into the very “bullies” they think critics to be.

The Power of the Backstage: The Dramaturgy of Doxxing

But why do people doxx in the first place? Ironically, even if people hide behind fake accounts, they might just be presenting us with a clear reflection of their real selves. Explained in his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, sociologist Erving Goffman introduced us to the perspective of dramaturgy.

Goffman mentioned that all of us are actors performing in a play and have two “stages” where we per-form, either for others or ourselves. He defines the frontstage as the “part of the individual’s per-form-ance, which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion. We define the situation for those who observe the performance.” This is our front, the act we show people, as there are cultural norms that will reintegratively shame us into conforming to social mores otherwise.

Then there is the backstage, which Goffman defines as the part where “the performer can relax; he can drop his front, forgo speaking in his lines and step out of character.” Roughly equivalent to Sig-mund Freud’s concept of id, this is the part where we can all be who we really are, where we don’t have to pretend to be or perform for anyone else. This is also the seat of our darkest, most primitive behaviors, unbound by rules of society. But deviance will ensue when we let our backstage supersede our frontstage.



The Corruption of the Frontstage

There are various measures in place by which society makes deviants conform. They are all for one purpose: to prevent them from breaking rules of morality, taboo, and shared values built by societies. Deviants can transform societies, but they can also just as quickly destroy them, and members of these communities regulate these behaviors. That is why everyone has a frontstage: because while everyone has a dark side, we know well enough that there are consequences to the violence, immorality, and downright hurtful behavior.

But dummy accounts can bypass the frontstage. Here, virtually free from consequences, the people behind the dummies can express their darkest, most violent behaviors without fear of immediate consequences. In short, dummy accounts, when used this way, are the exposed backstages of their users, free to do deviant actions while other members of the community are powerless to police them. The doxxing bonanza from these pop fic “warriors” against literary critics is just one manifestation of this frontstage corruption.

There might be safeguards in place to make sure that these behaviors are curtailed. For instance, Facebook has a very comprehensive reporting system where anyone can tag a specific post as a form of harassment. But they rarely enforce these rules unless mass reporting is done. Even if a doxxing post or account is deleted, the lax rules in account creation mean that a deleted dummy account can very quickly multiply to a hundred more.

The only way to permanently stop a doxxer behind a dummy is to identify the real person, and we do have technologies (like IP tracing) that make this possible. We even have laws in place like anti-cybercrime law. But do we really expect NBI to sift through billions of fake accounts to identify one doxxer, and would they even care if there is no immediate threat or danger to life? That, and they are mostly focused on other matters, anyway. These limitations just make it very palatable for doxxers to continue what they do in abundance.



So what is our way forward?

Getting doxxed is scary, sometimes even life-threatening, and worse, the threat of doxxing has forced several people to self-censor even more. Ironically, these very same doxxers accuse legitimate journalists of doxxing themselves, which could not be further from the truth.

Emmy Grey Ellis summed it up nicely in her article “Don’t Let the Alt-Right Fool You: Journalism Isn’t Doxing” —

[R]eal and important differences exist between doxing and reporting. For one, most doxing is done by anonymous agents. Reporters have bylines, and can therefore be held accountable — ethically, legal-ly, financially — for the words they write and the repercussions those words have. Reporters announce their intentions and their profession openly, while dox-ers could be anybody. Reporters include only personal information that is relevant to a story — facts the public has an compelling interest in knowing.

There are specific steps to prevent being doxxed, which ironically includes doxxing yourself. While we can never prevent people from doxxing us completely, we can at least control the amount of information they can use against us.

Ultimately, the main goal of doxxers is to destroy us into silence. But truth should never be censored, and no amount of threats should scare us into being mute. While we wait for much stronger regulation against fake accounts and better enforcement of existing laws against doxxing, let us sit back and reflect at what these doxxers behind dummies really are: they are spineless people without conviction, afraid of standing up to their own principles in the real world. Because if they are not, why would they need to hide behind a dummy? The answer is simple: they are afraid of their own ghosts. Because then, if they express an opinion, they can’t defend, or do a deviant action against the values of society, they will actually need to face the ghost of their own wrongdoing. And what are cowards afraid of the most, if not consequences?



Ang Tunay na Kababalaghan ng “Ang Mga Kaibigan ni Mama Susan”

Ang Mga Kaibigan ni Mama Susan ay ang ikawalong aklat na nailimbag ni Bob Ong, sagisag-panulat ng isang Pilipinong manunulat na hanggang ngayon ay lihim pa din ang tunay na pagkatao. Malawak ang mga paksa at genre na tinatalakay ni Ong sa kaniyang mga akda, mu-la social commentaries hanggang romance, ngunit ito ang unang pagkakataon na nagsulat siya ng horror.

Umiikot ang istorya kay Galo, isang labing-anim na taong gulang na binata na nag-aaral sa isang pamantasan sa Maynila. Dahil sa kahirapan at pagiging ulilang lubos, nakitira si Galo sa tahanan ng kaniyang tiyuhin habang nagtatrabaho upang makalikom ng sapat na salaping pangtustos sa kaniyang pag-aaral. Bagama't first person ang pagkakalahad sa istorya, kakaiba ang paraan ng pagsulat ni Ong dahil ginawa niyang pawang talaarawan ang pagsasaad ni Galo sa kaniyang mga karanasan. Hindi ito ang unang pagkakataon na ginamit ang ganitong pama-maraan. Halimbawa, sa mga banyagang akda tulad ng Perks of Being a Wallflower ni Stephen Chomsky at Stolen ni Lucy Christopher, matatandaang naglahad ang mga pangunahing karakter sa pamamagitan ng pagsulat ng liham.

Gaya ng ibang first person na akda, mainam ang paraang ito dahil naunawaan natin ng mas malinaw ang mundong ginagalawan ni Galo. Sa mga unang kabanata, mararamdaman ng mga mambabasa ang kaniyang kawalang pag-asa dahil sa mga suliranin sa pag-ibig, pera, at pami-lya, at kung gaano na lamang ang kaniyang pag-iisa:

“Hindi ko talaga alam kung may pag-asa pa ‘ko. Natatakot ako sa hinaharap. Ambata-bata ko pa pero minsan hindi na ‘ko pinapatulog ng mga ganitong pag-aalala.”



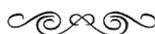
Bagama't maiksi lamang ang nobela, mabagal ang pag-usad ng mga kaganapan dahil ang unang bahagi ay tumatalakay lamang sa mga karanasan ni Galo sa Maynila; umikot ang istorya sa mga samu't-saring suliranin niya sa kaniyang kursunadang babae, kawalan ng pera, kawalan ng kasiguraduhang makapagtapos sa pag-aaral, at pag-aalala sa kaniyang lolang may sakit. "Huwag mong bibigkasin ang hindi mo naiintindihan"

Nagsimula ang kababalaghan ng nagpasiya si Galo na umuwi sa kanilang probinsya sa Tarmanes upang alagaan ang kaniyang lola na si Susan. Bagama't may mga nakakatakot nang sipi sa mga pangunang bahagi ng akda, kung saan napapanaginipan ni Galo ang isang babaing nakaitim. Sa pangalawang bahagi na ito nailahad nang mas husto ni Ong ang mga pangyayaring ito. Nail-arawan din ng mainam ni Ong ang lugar at kaganapan sa Tarmanes at kung paano ito nagbago ayon sa pagka-alala ni Galo. Mahusay ang paggamit ng may-akda ng misteryo at rebelasyon ng mga lihim upang maging epektibo ang tensyon sa nobela.

Halimbawa, nalaman natin na may mga kasalanan pala si Galo sa Maynila at hindi siya kasing-inosente tulad ng kaniyang sinusulat sa kaniyang talaarawan. Nalaman din natin na hindi totoong magkamag-anak si Lola Susan at Galo dahil inampon lamang ni Lola Susan ang kani-yang ina (ito rin ang dahilan kung bakit nagbago ang tawag niya rito, mula "Lola" ay naging "Mama Susan"). Ang pagpili sa ganitong istilo ang nagdagdag ng tensiyon at nagpabilis sa daloy ng pangalawang bahagi ng nobela.

Bukod sa misteryo, mainam ang paglalarawan ni Ong sa mga animo'y mga normal na bagay at pangyayari na may kaakibat na hiwaga. Sa mga sumusunod na sisip, inilahad niya kung paano niya natuklasan ang mga rebultong kinahumalingan ng kaniyang lola at kung ano ang mga rit-wal sa pagsamba sa kaniyang bagong relihiyon:

"Kakaiba yung rosary nila kasi parang may iba silang idinagdag na hindi ko maintindihan (...) May sampung taong bumubuhay kay lola habang kumakanta (...) idinuduyan nila si lola na para bang ihahagis sa altar.



Ang totoo, kinikilabutan na ‘ko. Nakakatakot kasi pag tiningnan mo sila sa mata, lalo na pag ti-nitignan ka nila pabalik habang nanginginig sila sa sahig. Antalas ng tingin, parang hindi tao and nakatingin sa’yo.”

Ang katapusan ng nobela ay walang resolusyon, isang huling misteryo na magpapa-isip sa mambabasa. Hindi din ito bagong pamamaraan: ang cliffhanger ay isang mahusay ngunit kara-niwang trope na makikita sa horror genre. Bukod dito, maaring maihalintulad sa naisulat na bersyon ng found footage ang nobel—ang ito dahil maaaring mawari ng mambabasa na ang akda ay talaarawan ni Galo at hindi natin malalaman kung ano ang kaniyang kapalaran sa huli.

Ang Tunay na Kababalaghan

Kung susuriin ang mga sikat na akda o pelikula, hindi pa rin nakakatakas sa mundo ng hiwaga ang pagsasalaysay ukol sa horror genre dito sa Pilipinas. Maaaring ito ay bahagi ng katutubong paniniwala natin sa mga lamang-lupa, engkanto, aswang, multo, o sa pagkakataong ito, demonyo o masamang espiritu na kumikitil sa mala-Kristiyanong pananampalataya ng nakararami. Mahusay ang paggamit ng may-akda ng mga elementong ito upang bigyan ng kababalaghan ang nobela. Ngunit sa mas malalim na pagsusuri, mas madami pang mas naka-katakot na pangyayari ang isinaad ni Ong sa kaniyang maigsing akda.

Isa sa mga tema na tinalakay ay ang epekto ng kapitalismo sa pag-unlad (o pagkalugmok) ng isang lugar. Inilarawan ni Galo ang Tarmanes bilang isang “napag-iwanan” na lugar, kung saan iwinawaksi ng mga tao ang anumang anyo ng pag-unlad (tulad ng kuryente o modernong ospital). Ngunit sa mas malalim na pag-unawa, makikita natin na ang Tarmanes ay sumasalamin sa mga bahagi ng Pilipinas na napabayaan ng pamahalaan dahil sa kanilang pokus sa mga mas urbanisadong lugar. Napabayaan ang probinsya nila Galo, at marahil dahil sa kahirapan at kakulangan sa lokal na ekonomiya, bumalik sa pundamentalismo ang pananampalataya ng mga tao. Dahil sa kawalan ng tulong mula sa pamahalaan, iniasa na lamang ng mga tao sa lokal na relihiyon ang kanilang pangangailan sa medisina, kabuhayan, at moralidad, sa pamamagitan ng pagsamba at pagda-dasal sa mga rebultong walang pangalan.



Higit pa rito, naging kalaban na mismo ng kanilang paniniwala ang mga bagay na kaakibat ng kapitalismo at modernisasyon ayon kay Mama Susan:

“Walang tigil ang mga tao sa paggamit ng enerhiya. Lahat ng maaaring pagkagastusan ng kuryente, gagawin nila. Nabubuhay sila sa sistema ng pag-aani ng kayamanan ng mundo upang gawing lason at basura.”

Masasabi rin na ang mga suliranin ni Galo ay dahil sa epekto ng kapitalismo at globalisasyon. Matatandaang OFW ang kaniyang ina at namatay dahil sa bitay. Kailangan niya ding magnakaw upang maipagpatuloy ang kaniyang pag-aaral dahil hindi na siya kayang tustusan ng kaniyang mga kamag-anak. Lahat ng mga ito ay totooong mga pangyayari na maaari nating makita sa bansa ngayon.

Ang pangalawang malawak na tema na tinalakay sa akda ay ang konsepto ng moralidad. Gaya nang nasabi na, hindi perpekto ang karakter ni Galo ‘di tulad ng paglalarawan sa kaniya sa unang bahagi ng nobela. Siya ay biktima, oo, ngunit madami siyang ginawa na nagdulot ng pag-usig sa kaniya ng kaniyang budhi.

Una, ninakaw niya ang class fund dahil siya ang may hawak ng pera ng kaniyang mga kamag-aral. Pangalawa, ninakaw niya din ang cellphone ng kaniyang pinsan. Pangatlo, at maaaring pinakanakababahala, nabuntis niya ang kaniyang nobya at pinilit niya itong magpalaglag.

Maaari nating sabihin na biktima pa din si Galo ng lipunan dahil siya ay isang ulila na gusto lang mag-aral kaya niya nagawang magnakaw, at dahil sa kawalan ng magulang at sa konser-batibong estado ng sex education sa bansa, maaaring hindi siya nagabayan nang maayos ukol sa maaaring dulot ng pakikipagtalik at maagang pagbubuntis. Ngunit sinasalamin ng nobela ang moralidad mismo ni Galo — alam niya sa kaniyang sarili na mali pa rin ang kaniyang mga ginawa — at kakatwang isipin kung ang mga “demonyo” na humahabol sa kaniya ay totooong may bahid ng kababalaghan, o sadya lang na minumulto siya ng sarili niyang konsensya.



Pagbabagong-anyo na Higit sa Kababalaghan

Ang Mga Kaibigan ni Mama Susan ay isang kakaibang akda na pupukaw sa interes ng mamba-basa dahil sa tipikal na kababalaghan nito; ngunit isa itong magandang halimbawa ng akda na nagbabago ang anyo sa mas malalim na pag-susuri. Ang komentaryong panlipunan na naibahagi nito, sinadya man o aksidental, ay sumasalamin sa ilang mga suliranin na hanggang ngayon ay hindi pa rin masolusyunan ng ating bansa. Marahil, ito talaga ang tunay na kababalaghan na nais iparating ni Bob Ong, dahil 'di hamak na mas higit na nakakatakot ang mga pang araw-araw na realidad kaysa sa mga bagay na maaaring produkto lamang ng ating mga guni-guni.

Masasabing isang magandang dagdag ang akdang ito sa panitikang Pilipino dahil sa mass appeal: kilala si Bob Ong bilang isang may-akda dahil sa nga kakatwa ngunit relatable niyang akda. Isa itong magandang tulay upang makapagbasa ang masang Pilipino ng mga akdang tu-matalakay sa mga sensitibo at makbuluhang tema habang nagsisilbi pa ding nakawiwiling ba-basahin. Sa katunayan, kasalukuyan itong isasabuhay bilang pelikula, patunay lamang na in-teresado ang masang Pilipino sa nilalaman nito. Hindi lahat ng nararapat na babasahin ay mas akmang pormal, o “classic”; minsan, mas madaling mapukaw ang interes ng isang tao sa mga mas karaniwang bagay, at magandang kompromiso ang mga akdang tulad ng Ang Mga Kaibig-an ni Mama Susan upang mas mahumaling ang mga taong magbasa, at kung papalarin, mamu-lat sa mga suliraning pambansa at pansarili.



Taking Back “Woke”: Surviving Anti-Intellectualism in an Apathetic World

Woke. It is a word that started as a call to justice in oppressed communities, but is now rampant in digital spaces as an identifier of people practicing “cancel culture.” This verb-turned-adjective’s once noble power has now become corrupted, trickling down to the recesses of meme culture to describe the caricatured versions of “social justice warriors,” “liberals,” or the equally perverse “snowflakes.”

Weaponization of words is not a new concept. We have seen how power has corrupted words, from relatively innocuous ones like “salvage,” to grand ideologies like communism, conservatism, and liberalism, into divisive and sometimes dangerous modern forms. This is now particularly more important in the age of (dis)information, wherein ideological battles are starting to be fought in digital spaces.

‘Woking’ Up

Woke culture has its origins in the 1800’s in the United States where it was used as a counter against racially oppressive social mechanisms. It is somewhat curious, then, that the recent use of this term in the US also has the same political undertones relating to the African-American community. Merriam-Webster defines woke as:

“[A] watch word in parts of the black community for those who were self-aware, questioning the dominant paradigm and striving for something better... The word woke became entwined with the Black Lives Matter movement; instead of just being a word that signaled awareness of injustice or racial tension, it became a word of action. Activists were woke and called on others to stay woke.”



‘Woke’ has since then spread from just discussing racial injustice to cover all forms of awareness of oppression. It has also spread geographically with the power of social media. Twitter, in particular, is seen as a powerful channel for political discussions, especially for millennials and Gen Zs who are its primary users. It is no surprise that ‘woke’ has reached the Philippines, perhaps because of the neoco-lonial connections with its country of origin. The results have been divisive at best, from people appreciating the importance of giving voices to the underrepresented, to those who think that there is such a thing as “too much freedom of speech.”

Apathy, Anti-Intellectualism, and the ‘Woke Corruption’

Social media has changed the ideological game in one big way: aside from some minor restrictions, it is basically free-for-all real estate wherein everyone, regardless of status, gender, race, or political affiliation, can discuss ideas or provide critique. Truly, you only need to browse Facebook or Twitter for a few seconds to see a post discussing the latest political gaffe or a call to action for some social movement. This unprecedented reach afforded by social media enabled woke culture to be amplified even greater, and everyone with an internet connection can now participate.

However, it is also this proliferation that ironically corrupted the ‘woke’ movement. Opponents of ‘woke culture’ have expressed reservations that the discourse of woke politics have become more combative than constructive, toxic even. An opinion piece by Marielle Filoteo stated that woke culture has now become nothing but a competition of sorts, in that “awareness of social politics to feel superior over others only shows that your wokeness is nothing but a call for attention. It’s reached a point where if you unknowingly say the wrong thing, you’re deemed as problematic and dismissed.”



Another common criticism of woke culture is it is seen as a fad, and by extension, merely a lip service which calls to action without doing an action itself. According to an opinion piece by Ruby Philips, woke culture has forced one to “think about how it has become trendy to feign social awareness instead of engaging with institutional issues around us.” This perception is relevant in our country wherein it is very common for anyone airing criticism and asking for accountability to be asked what their actual contributions are to solve the problem. This has become so pervasive that it has now entered the annals of meme culture.

The problem with this perception is that puts the burden of accountability on the oppressed: it is a classic method of gaslighting mainly used by anti-intellectuals to silence relevant criticism by dismissing them as fatuous. By painting “wokes” as loud and thoughtless individuals whose only way to contribute to the larger discourse is to “make noise” on social media, it disempowers constructive criticism and turns it on its head. We can’t know exactly how much the extent of the damage is, but it is clear that this deliberate and sinister corruption of the word “woke” is a premeditated attempt to silence critics, disavow critical thinking, and take away the rights of the masses to make anyone in power accountable for their actions.

In the Philippines, one can argue that this persistent apathy is caused by decades, if not centuries, of colonial and neocolonial abuse, so much so that the average Filipino is now desensitized of the actual responsibilities of those in power to those who put them in those positions in the first place. The perceived failure, for instance, of the 1986 People Power revolution as a cure-all for social ills cast a dark cloud of doubt on what criticism can actually do to inspire social change; that, perhaps, voices calling out for something better is nothing but white noise after all. Still, this does not justify people blanket rejecting criticism as an instrument of change.



Taking Back 'Woke'

Apathy is a privilege. Our choice to not speak about things that do not affect us directly is informed by our social positions. On the other end of the spectrum, it is also a privilege to be able to speak up, and thus we should always use it to our advantage as long as we have the ability. The demonization of woke culture is a manifestation of a fear of change, and we should always keep in mind that the people who would not like society to change are those that are benefiting from the status quo.

In the modern world where smart-shaming is weaponized to keep criticism in check, it is even more imperative that we keep a clear head and realize what struggles matter most. Words have power, and while some people have successfully used 'woke' against us, it is time to take it back. Woke is not a status symbol, nor is it a fad. Woke is the recognition that there is something so much bigger than us, that we exist outside ourselves. Woke means accepting that every single one of us is part of a human family, and that we must always remain vigilant to those who marginalize one member for the other's gain. We should own the power of our words and recognize how they can initiate change. As Louis Althusser put it:

“[I]n political, ideological and philosophical struggles, words are also weapons, explosives or tranquilizers and poisons. Occasionally, the whole class struggle may be summed up in the struggle for one word against another word. Certain words struggle amongst themselves as enemies. Other words are the site of an ambiguity: the stake in a decisive but undecided battle.”

Being woke is in itself a privilege, albeit a very difficult one to bear. So if you consider yourself woke, be prepared for battle, for the enemy of consciousness is unconscionable ignorance. Wear woke as a badge of honor. And whatever you do, never go back to sleep. The war is far from won.





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